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Battle of the Standard, by Leonardo da Vinci
Copy of the central group in the destroyed picture of the Battle of Anghiari in the Council Hall, Florence

THE PAINTING OF WAR

IT may seem strange that Leonardo, the most detached of men, whose soul was scarcely stirred in its depths by the wars and upheavals that harassed the surface of his life, should have described more vividly than anyone the best way to paint the frenzy of battle. In the tense and graphic passage of the "Trattato," which begins with a sentence, more suggestive of modern times than of the Renaissance, about clouds of artillery smoke hanging in the air, he spares us no detail of the ferocity of war. The vanquished are to be shown pale with effort and anguish, their faces wrinkled with lines of pain. Their lips are parted in a cry of terror or despair. The ground is sown with corpses and broken weapons, and where it is visible among the *debris* the streams of blood have changed it into a half-liquid crimson mire. In the confusion lie many distorted in the death agony, while those less hurt are trying to give themselves a last protection against the enemy with their shields, or, deprived of arms, are turning on him with teeth and nails. Over all this hangs the pall of battle: the gunners are lit up with a ruddy glow from spurts of flame, among the dust and smoke; the squadrons of the reserve, drawn up in readiness, peer into the mist, shading their eyes; and from time to time combatants emerge from the struggle, to wipe the blinding mud off their faces. Riderless horses gallop about, scattering confusion, while others are to be shown plunging through a river, the water seething and foaming high about them; and, for a final counsel, "see that you make no level spot of ground that is not trampled over with blood."

We ask ourselves how Leonardo's calm spirit could have entered into all this turmoil, and at first we are perplexed. But we realize that he who had "learn-

ed the art of going deep," who was equally alert to track meanings and to note appearances, would not have shrunk from possibilities which were a challenge to both life and art. When Leonardo speaks it is not only as artist, but as the untiring explorer of nature and man. It is not the musing of a dreamer, for it was as a military engineer that he served Cæsar Borgia; and the curious letter in which he offered his services to Sforza is almost entirely taken up with an enumeration of the military secrets he had mastered, the mention of his artistic capacities, and even the mention of peace itself, coming like an after-thought. Yet how little all this seems to matter when his "Battle of Anghiari," which as a mere fragment was every one's wonder, and would probably have been the most extraordinary of his masterpieces, is forever lost to us. We have to reconstruct it piecemeal from a drawing here and there, from studies of the heads of combatants, and copies of the central group at first or second hand, like the famous one by Rubens in the Louvre; filling in the background from the ideas in his written sketch. Even these morsels are graphic enough to make us realize the lost masterpiece more vividly than many battle pictures which are finished to the last button. To look once attentively at the least of them is to remember it forever—the speed and fury of movement in the drawings where a confused battle rages, while horsemen, dominating it, stab downwards with their lances; or the cruel ferocity of those heads in the Budapest study, where we hardly separate the frenzy of the moment from some eternal passion. The copies of the central group, the "Battle of the Standard," show how Leonardo would have gathered up and concentrated these impressions and with what intensity he would have charged his canvas, where even the

horses become combatants like the men.

The advance in realism is so great that, if we compare them to the warriors of Uccello or Piero della Francesca, these soldiers seem to be living in a different world. Charm is a word hardly appropriate to battles, yet we may find ourselves regretting the disappearance of a charm that belonged to those earlier masters, where the limitations were frank and everything was subordinate to a cunning and exquisite design. Just so in the unrelieved grimness of modern war one might regret the bloodless battles of Italian condottieri. We regret the pageantry, we regret everything which hides from us the real purpose of war. One may contemplate the battles of Piero or of Uccello with unmixed delight. Humanity is amiable, the perspective studies are amusing, and the combinations of color are a pleasure to the eye. How charming are the costumes, the great armorial banners, and the white horses which brighten the clashing crowd. But when they meet the warriors are frozen motionless, and appear like beings in a looking-glass land. There is a slow processional rhythm, but nothing in a more exciting key.

The contrast with Leonardo seems all the sharper because we have his masterpiece only in the form of fragments and ideas. If we had the whole we should doubtless find that, in spite of the emphasis of feeling, everything had been fused in a magnificent design. We can guess, in fact, from what there is that the scene would have been unified in lines of rhythmical movement which would have been perfectly satisfying and expressive. Yet no one could have felt before Leonardo's painting, as we can feel before Piero's, that it was simply a pattern. The supreme arrangement would have enforced on us, unconsciously no doubt, but all the more profoundly, the "*bestialissima pazzia*" of the scene portrayed. Leonardo felt this, and meant us to feel it. He painted as a realist, not with the realism of mere external correctness, but with the psychological realism that depicts "man and the intention of his soul."

For Uccello and Piero war had been a chivalrous ceremonial. For the old Greek artists who made the Alexander mosaic at Naples or the sarcophagus of Sidon it was a natural activity, a reasonable expression of vigorous manhood. For Leonardo it must have been, in some degree, a horror. Before his fresco we should have seen that he had called up some spirit from the depths, and we could hardly have helped asking in dismay whether that was really an image of ourselves.

Probably sheer delight in its vitality would have carried us away, as it does before the work of an Oriental artist who lived through times as tumultuous as Leonardo's and recorded his experience with something of the same intensity. Keion had seen the critical phase of Japanese history, at the end of the twelfth century, when the military power rose; when the great military clans fought out their quarrel and the Shogunate was founded in blood and fire; when individuality and ambition and violence shattered courtliness and custom. An amazing sense of speed is the first impression given by his "*Flight Turning a Corner*"—one of the war scenes painted on his "roll" in the Boston Museum, and reproduced in Fenollosa's volumes on Eastern art. A multitude of courtiers on horseback or in carriages, escorted by mounted archers, pours past the eye and then whirls madly down towards us, making a turn. Every one presses recklessly for himself; it is a perfect stampede, and we hold our breath for the inevitable crash. The dark-rimmed chariot wheels leap into the air behind the galloping bulls, and the spokes are whizzing round so fast that we no longer see them, except in one case, where clear radiating lines show that a carriage has been brought to a standstill. Our second feeling—or was it, indeed, the first?—is that all this makes an exquisite pattern. The chaos of frantic men and beasts analyses into a wonderful mosaic, with rich detail and bold contrasts of light and dark color, blended by the sweeping lines of movement. The great dark

ovals of the carriage wheels strike a sort of deep bass note that recurs in the intricate figure-pattern. The bows of the archers in the background remind us of the spikes and lances of Velasquez.

In the "March" a little column of troops and courtiers is cautiously advancing. The main body is headed by the commander, reining in his impatient white charger. Before him are two infantry scouts; they are preceded by an officer on a black charger, which has reared and left the ground in a sudden leap—a marvelous little figure; in front of all moves a single archer with his arrow on the string. Military prudence has been made the basis for a beautifully planned design, and its feeling, though different, is as vital as that of the "Flight." Fenollosa aptly says that Keion's soldiers look like figures from Greek vases under whose feet bombs have been exploded.

Why is it that there seems to be a gulf between these older works of art and the battle-pieces of modern painters, the painters of the nineteenth century? It is as though the latter had never made up their minds whether their real business was art or anecdote; or rather as if they had too often settled definitely that it was not art. What we enjoy is the pleasure of identifying remembered scenes or transporting ourselves into some moment of history when life ran high. Art has passed into illustration. The figure of Napoleon has a fatal significance from this point of view, because its seduction for the illustrator has been so great. If he is in a picture we cannot forget him—nor can we forget the little hat, the gray overcoat, and the white charger. Everything about him is of such tremendous personal interest. That is just the worst of it. All would be well if we could see him simply as the incarnate drama of will, passion, or resolve; as Mr. Hardy, in *The Dynasts*, suddenly shows us the nerves of the Immanent Will thrilling through the Emperor and the other human actors. But alas! we know too many facts, and the painter knows them too—the grand strategy and the army corps and the

marshals and the little hat and the rest of the *epopee*. So what we have is illustrated biography. Vernet gives us the legend as pose—the *geste* and all the accessories that are needed for Emperor-worship. Meissonnier paints the chief campaigns with minute external detail, adding numerous anecdotes. Verestchagin grapples more boldly with convention; but he too cannot get over the high-collared marshals or the little hat.

Illustration is excellent up to a point; it satisfies us all in certain moods, and there are some whom it satisfies at all times; but it does not cover every possibility, and it is not what the greatest painters would have given us. Perhaps it is modern curiosity and modern external realism that are to blame. Our painters have shipwrecked on the insignificance of detail. When we look at a picture like the "Lanzas" of Velasquez this does not distract us, and it does not make any difference to our enjoyment that the event which he painted really occurred; for he has subdued the incident, the personality of the two commanders, and the characteristics of the groups to his general design. It may be long before we ask ourselves what it was all about, and it may be never, yet the picture is one of the interesting pictures of the world. Painting can do this for us only when it keeps the supreme qualities of art. It would be rash to say that these have absolutely vanished from modern battle-painting; a charge by Morot may give us swift movement and coherent line, and in Lady Butler's pictures vitality nearly conquered anecdote. Verestchagin approached war in a spirit of questioning like Leonardo's; the mound of skulls in his "Apotheosis of War," or the "Trophies," where the Emir in a sunny colonnade inspects the heads of his enemies, enforce his conclusion. But these are not paintings of war so much as moralizings over it; Verestchagin divorces the meaning from the action and makes his appeal through symbols. The weakness of this method is that such impressions are apt not to last, and we turn our backs on the didactic unless it is supremely vindicated by art.

The problem is certainly hard, and the conditions of modern fighting have not made it easier. Could anything be less pictorially suggestive than "the front"—the interminable lines of trench, stretching, one knows, for hundreds of miles, and marked by shallow and unsightly excavations? Selection and concentration have become more necessary than ever. The action is too vast to be covered by the mind, much less by the eye. As a compensation modern war has made it more difficult to paint merely frivolous representations of military scenes, because it has dealt a death-blow to the seductive details of bearskins and buttons and gaiters. It is likely to warn off any serious painter unless he feels he can control his subject

and say something new. But there is no reason why we should think that modern warfare with machines presents an impossibility to art. There is even something prophetic in that opening sentence of Leonardo's about clouds of smoke hanging in the sky; it suggests the great artillery conflicts of today. And would he, whose thoughts had been busy with the possibility of flying, have shrunk from the opportunities for fresh design presented by a battle between airships or aeroplanes? The intricacy of the conditions offers a challenge to anyone who thinks he can subdue it. It is not because the painting of war has become impracticable that modern art has produced no great battlepiece.

